

Halal demand rising in Western Canada

Farmers are trusted sources for Muslim consumers as niche market grows

by PETER MITHAM

VANCOUVER – A report by Nourish Marketing Inc. indicates that the market for halal products in Canada could exceed that for Chinese foods by next year.

Halal products are those deemed ritually clean for consumption by Muslims. The sixth annual study of the halal market by Nourish, a Toronto-based food and beverage marketing agency, says the segment is one of the fastest growing in the country.

“In general, the appetite for halal is bigger outside of urban areas, and outside Toronto, specifically,” said Salima Jivraj, head of Nourish Multicultural and the founder of Halal Foodie. “We are seeing a lift in demand in the West.”

Drawing on data from Statistics Canada, Nourish reports that Canada’s Muslim population will top 1.4 million next year, exceeding the size of the Chinese ethnic market.

While several products bear the designation, meat accounts for the largest segment of the market.

“It’s probably close to 80%, just because of the nature of halal,” she said. “It all stems from meat.”

Sales of fresh halal meat total approximately \$1 billion annually.

However, the market penetration of products is tough to achieve because of the size of Canada. Most manufacturers are based in Toronto, and the size of the total market – Muslims are less than 5% of Canada’s population – limit

distribution.

“Unless it’s a national product, created by companies like Loblaws or Maple Leaf, you don’t get as much variety in terms of halal products,” Jivraj explains.

Indeed, the majority of study participants in BC identified the Real Canadian Superstore as their primary source of halal groceries.

But smaller retailers, and in turn smaller suppliers, are critical in providing halal options in markets beyond the country’s major urban centres.

Farmers’ markets key

Jivraj points out that farmers’ markets were key suppliers of halal meat in Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s because consumers could meet suppliers directly and explain what they needed.

“There was no halal meat readily available, so what would happen is that everyday consumers would go to farmers’ markets and have conversations with farmers and say, ‘Hey, could you slaughter some animals for me in this method?’” she says. “That prompted entrepreneurs to start opening up their own butcher shops, and that’s how the industry ignited.”

Now, with a second generation moving out of the major cities and new waves of immigration settling in rural communities, demand for halal products is emerging outside the traditional centres.

This has given small, local suppliers a lift. According to



SALIMA JIVRAJ

this year’s study, they’re increasingly trusted over large players.

“This year’s study reported that 64% of respondents do not believe grocery food chains are doing a good job meeting their needs while 68% feel the same way about major food companies,” a summary of the study results stated. “These ratings have worsened over time, continuing to drop further each year.”

Building trust

Jivraj says the personal connection consumers have with suppliers is critical to building trust.

“The bottom line is trust,” she says. “There’s far more trust working directly with a farmer than going into a big-box retailer.”

The rise of values-based shopping, whether it’s for organic, free range or humane production, also favours the rise of halal.

“A big part of halal isn’t just how the slaughter happens, it’s about how the animal was raised,” she said. “That’s another bonus and plus a small farmer can add versus a larger corporation.”

Boosting the supply of halal meat has figured in consultations aimed at expanding slaughter capacity across the province. Typically, the demand has been met by smaller, Class E establishments, which operate in underserved regions and can be set up to serve specialty markets.

One new Class E licence was issued last year, but it isn’t enough.

Gavin Last, executive director of the food safety and inspection branch at the BC Ministry of Agriculture,

told the annual meeting of the BC Association of Abattoirs last year that even large markets such as the Lower Mainland are underserved at peak periods.

Demand for halal meat spikes at the end of the annual fasting period of Ramadan, which ends this year on May 23.

“The halal meat supply in the Lower Mainland becomes quite an issue around the time of Eid,” Last said.

Consumers in the BC Interior are typically served by regional operators. Kawano Farms, a Class A abattoir in Prince George, is one example. It has found a niche providing various meat products, including halal cuts, that local grocery stores typically don’t stock.



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